The New York Times

July 14, 2012

Two Classes, Divided by 'I Do'

By JASON DePARLE

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Jessica Schairer has so much in common with her boss, Chris Faulkner, that a visitor to the day care center they run might get them confused.

They are both friendly white women from modest Midwestern backgrounds who left for college with conventional hopes of marriage, motherhood and career. They both have children in elementary school. They pass their days in similar ways: juggling toddlers, coaching teachers and swapping small secrets that mark them as friends. They even got tattoos together. Though Ms. Faulkner, as the boss, earns more money, the difference is a gap, not a chasm.

But a friendship that evokes parity by day becomes a study of inequality at night and a testament to the way family structure deepens class divides. Ms. Faulkner is married and living on two paychecks, while Ms. Schairer is raising her children by herself. That gives the Faulkner family a profound advantage in income and nurturing time, and makes their children statistically more likely to finish college, find good jobs and form stable marriages.

Ms. Faulkner goes home to a trim subdivision and weekends crowded with children's events. Ms. Schairer's rent consumes more than half her income, and she scrapes by on food stamps.

"I see Chris's kids — they're in swimming and karate and baseball and Boy Scouts, and it seems like it's always her or her husband who's able to make it there," Ms. Schairer said. "That's something I wish I could do for my kids. But number one, that stuff costs a lot of money and, two, I just don't have the time."

The economic storms of recent years have raised concerns about growing inequality and questions about a core national faith, that even Americans of humble backgrounds have a good chance of getting ahead. Most of the discussion has focused on labor market forces like falling blue-collar wages and lavish Wall Street pay.

But striking changes in family structure have also broadened income gaps and posed new barriers to upward mobility. College-educated Americans like the Faulkners are increasingly likely to marry one another, compounding their growing advantages in pay. Less-educated women like Ms. Schairer, who left college without finishing her degree, are growing less likely to marry at all, raising children on pinched paychecks that come in ones, not twos.

Estimates vary widely, but scholars have said that changes in marriage patterns — as opposed to changes in individual earnings — may account for as much as 40 percent of the growth in certain measures of

inequality. Long a nation of economic extremes, the United States is also becoming a society of family haves and family have-nots, with marriage and its rewards evermore confined to the fortunate classes.

"It is the privileged Americans who are marrying, and marrying helps them stay privileged," said Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University.

About 41 percent of births in the United States occur outside marriage, up sharply from 17 percent three decades ago. But equally sharp are the educational divides, according to an analysis by Child Trends, a Washington research group. Less than 10 percent of the births to college-educated women occur outside marriage, while for women with high school degrees or less the figure is nearly 60 percent.

Long concentrated among minorities, motherhood outside marriage now varies by class about as much as it does by race. It is growing fastest in the lower reaches of the white middle class — among women like Ms. Schairer who have some postsecondary schooling but no four-year degree.

While many children of single mothers flourish (two of the last three presidents had mothers who were single during part of their childhood), a large body of research shows that they are more likely than similar children with married parents to experience childhood poverty, act up in class, become teenage parents and drop out of school.

Sara McLanahan, a Princeton sociologist, warns that family structure increasingly consigns children to "diverging destinies."

Married couples are having children later than they used to, divorcing less and investing heavily in parenting time. By contrast, a growing share of single mothers have never married, and many have children with more than one man.

"The people with more education tend to have stable family structures with committed, involved fathers," Ms. McLanahan said. "The people with less education are more likely to have complex, unstable situations involving men who come and go."

She said, "I think this process is creating greater gaps in these children's life chances."

Ms. Schairer's life offers a vivid example of how rapidly norms have changed. She grew up in a small town outside Ann Arbor, where her life revolved around church and school and everyone she knew was married.

"I thought, 'I'll meet someone, and we'll marry and have kids and the house and the white picket fence,' " she said. "That's what I wanted. That's what I still want."

She got pregnant during her first year of college, left school and stayed in a troubled relationship that left her with three children when it finally collapsed six years ago. She has had little contact with the children's father and receives no child support. With an annual income of just under $25,000, Ms. Schairer barely lifts her children out of poverty, but she is not one to complain. "I'm in this position because of decisions I made," she said.

She buys generic cereal at about half the brand-name price, takes the children to church every week and posts their happy moments on her Facebook page. Inequality is a word she rarely uses, though her family life is a showcase of its broadening reach.

"Two incomes would certainly help with the bills," she said. "But it's parenting, too. I wish I could say, 'Call your dad.' "

Path to Single Motherhood

The van with the cracked windshield arrived on a recent day at 7:30 a.m., and three people emerged, the smallest stifling yawns. Several days a week, Ms. Schairer opens the child care center 45 minutes before she can send her two youngest children to school. Bored children in work spaces make mornings tense.

Savannah, 7, crossed the play area on stilts. Steavon, 10, threw a ball. As parents with infants and toddlers hurried past, Ms. Schairer chided the two to stay out of the way. "They're really not supposed to be here," she said.

Steavon has Asperger syndrome, a mild form of autism that can lead to sharp mood swings. He slumped on her desk, wanting $2 to buy a bagel at school. Ms. Schairer does not carry cash — one way not to spend it — and handed him pretzels from home. "I don't like those!" he said, shoving them away.

Ms. Schairer is known for a spotless desk. Steavon found a leaky pen.

"I'm ready for you to go," she said.

Time away is money lost — Ms. Schairer punched a clock by the door — so she hurried the children to school and returned with a look of relief. A stop in Ms. Faulkner's office brought a bit of rejuvenating gossip: two teachers were having a tiff. Adult diversions are absent at home.

"I talk to myself a lot," Ms. Schairer said.

Although she grew up in the 1990s, Ms. Schairer's small-town childhood had a 1950s feel. Her father drove a beer truck, her mother served as church trustee and her grandparents lived next door. She knew no one rich, no one poor and no one raising children outside of marriage. "It was just the way it was," she said.

William Penn University, eight hours away in Iowa, offered a taste of independence and a spot on the basketball team. Her first thought when she got pregnant was "My mother's going to kill me." Abortion crossed her mind, but her boyfriend, an African-American student from Arkansas, said they should start a family. They agreed that marriage should wait until they could afford a big reception and a long gown.

Their odds were not particularly good: nearly half the unmarried parents living together at a child's birth split up within five years, according to Child Trends.

Ms. Schairer has trouble explaining, even to herself, why she stayed so long with a man who she said earned little, berated her often and did no parenting. They lived with family (his and hers) and worked off

and on while she hoped things would change. "I wanted him to love me," she said. She was 25 when the breakup made it official: she was raising three children on her own.

She had just answered an ad from a child care center that needed a teacher's assistant. Ms. Faulkner hired her and promoted her twice, most recently to assistant director.

"She was always stepping out of the classroom and helping," Ms. Faulkner said. "She just had that drive, that leader in her. I trust her completely."

Ms. Schairer took night classes and earned a degree from Washtenaw Community College. A supervisor from the corporate office wrote, "We are so lucky to have you." Still, after nearly six years, she remains an hourly employee making $12.35 an hour, simultaneously in management and on food stamps.

After Ms. Schairer had an operation for cervical cancer last summer, the surgeon told her to take six weeks off. She went back to work five weeks early, with a rare flash of class anger. "It's easy when you make $500 an hour to stand there and tell me to take six weeks off," she said. "I can't have six weeks with no pay."

A Broadening Gap

Despite the egalitarian trappings of her youth, Ms. Schairer was born (in 1981) as a tidal surge of inequality was remaking American life. Incomes at the top soared, progress in the middle stalled and the paychecks of the poor fell sharply.

Four decades ago, households with children at the 90th percentile of incomes received five times as much as those at the 10th percentile, according to Bruce Western and Tracey Shollenberger of the Harvard sociology department. Now they have 10 times as much. The gaps have widened even more higher up the income scale.

The reasons are manifold: the growing premium a college education commands, technological change that favors mind over muscle, the growth of the financial sector, the loss of manufacturing jobs to automation and foreign competitors, and the decline of labor unions.

But marriage also shapes the story in complex ways. Economic woes speed marital decline, as women see fewer "marriageable men." The opposite also holds true: marital decline compounds economic woes, since it leaves the needy to struggle alone.

"The people who need to stick together for economic reasons don't," said Christopher Jencks, a Harvard sociologist. "And the people who least need to stick together do."

Changes in family structure do not explain the gains of the very rich — the much-discussed "1 percent" and the richest among them. That story largely spills from Wall Street trading floors and corporate boardrooms.

But for inequality more broadly, Mr. Western found that the growth in single parenthood in recent decades accounted for 15 percent to 25 percent of the widening income gaps. (Estimates depend on the

time period, the income tiers and the definition of inequality.) Gary Burtless of the Brookings Institution found it to account for 21 percent. Robert Lerman of the Urban Institute, comparing lower-middle- and upper-middle-income families, found that single parenthood explained about 40 percent of inequality's growth. "That's not peanuts," he said.

Across Middle America, single motherhood has moved from an anomaly to a norm with head-turning speed. (That change received a burst of attention this year with the publication of Charles Murray's new book, "Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010," which attributed the decline of marriage to the erosion of values, rather than the decline of economic opportunity.)

As recently as 1990, just 10 percent of the births to women like Ms. Schairer (white women with some postsecondary schooling but not a full college degree) occurred outside marriage, according to Child Trends. Now it has tripled to 30 percent, compared with just 8 percent for women of all races with college degrees.

Less-educated women are also more likely to have children with more than one man. Analyzing nearly 2,000 mothers in their mid- to late 20s, Child Trends found that a third of those with high school degrees or less already had children with multiple men. So did 12 percent of mothers with some post-high-school training. But none of the women in the study who had finished college before giving birth had children with multiple men.

"That's a dramatic difference, and it varies by education more than by race," said Mindy Scott, a Child Trends demographer. "It tells you these families are on different trajectories. Having men in the house for a short time with ambiguous parenting roles can be really disruptive for children."

Ms. Schairer did not have a child with another man, but she did find a new boyfriend, who she thought would help with the children and the bills. They dated for a year before he moved in. Kirsten, 11, and Savannah liked him fine, but Steavon adored him.

"I'm not the only boy anymore; we're going to do boy stuff!" Ms. Schairer recounts him saying.

"What's boy stuff?" she asked.

"We're going to play video games and shoot Nerf guns and play Legos," he said.

"We do that now," she said.

"Yeah, but you're not a boy," he said.

The details of what followed are less important than the disappointment the boyfriend left behind. No Legos got built during his six-month stay, and it took a call to the police to get him to go. The children asked about him a few days later but have not mentioned him since.

Whether measured by Legos or marriage rates, the pattern is similar: the middle is shifting toward the bottom.

Forty years ago, the top and middle income thirds had virtually identical family patterns: more than 95 percent of households with children in either tier had two parents in the home. Since then the groups have diverged, according to Mr. Western and Ms. Shollenberger: 88 percent at the top have two parents, but just 71 percent do in the middle.

"Things remained extremely stable in the top third," Mr. Western said. "The middle is increasingly suffering some of the same disadvantages as the bottom."

That is the essence of the story of Ms. Faulkner and Ms. Schairer. What most separates them is not the impact of globalization on their wages but a 6-foot-8-inch man named Kevin.

School Trips and Scouting

Kevin Faulkner works the sunrise shift twice a week, leaving home at 5:30 a.m. for a computer programming job so he can leave work in time to take his sons to afternoon swim practice. Jeremy, 12, is serious and quiet. Justin, 10, is less driven but more openly affectionate. They arrived home recently to a note from Ms. Faulkner about the next day's Boy Scout trip.

Thursday night:

Pack

Kevin — Pay Home Depot

Chris — Sort clothes

The couple's life together has unfolded in to-do-list style. They did not inherit wealth or connections or rise on rare talent. They just did standard things in standard order: high school, college, job, marriage and children. "I don't think I could have done it any more by the books," Ms. Faulkner said.

The result is a three-bedroom house, two busy boys and an annual Disney cruise.

The secret to their success resides in part in old-fashioned math: strength in numbers. Together, the Faulkners earn nearly three times as much as what Ms. Faulkner earns alone. Their high five-figure income ranks them near the 75th percentile — hardly rich, but better off than nearly three of four families with children.

For Ms. Schairer, the logic works in reverse. Her individual income of $24,500 puts her at the 49th percentile among parents: smack in the middle. But with only one paycheck, her family income falls to the 19th percentile, lagging more than four out of five.

The Faulkners built a house in Livingston County because of the good schools. Ms. Schairer cares about education, too. But with Ann Arbor rents wreaking havoc on her budget, she is considering a move to a neighboring town where the school system lags. She shops at discount grocery stores and tells Savannah to keep away a friend who raids the cabinets.

"I feel bad, like maybe she's not getting enough to eat," Ms. Schairer said. "But sometimes I don't know what I'm going to feed my own kids, never mind another."

Jeremy Faulkner plays tennis and takes karate. Justin plays soccer and baseball. They both swim and participate in Boy Scouts, including a weeklong summer camp that brings the annual activities bill to about $3,500.

Boy Scouts has been especially important, offering the boys leadership opportunities and time with their father, who helps manage the troop and rarely misses a weekly meeting or monthly camping trip. Jeremy started as a shy boy terrified of public speaking. Now he leads the singalong and is racing to make Eagle Scout.

"He's just blossomed through Boy Scouts," Ms. Faulkner said. "I could do the scouting with them, because we have single moms who play that role. But they have different experiences with their dad. Kevin makes good money, but he's an awesome dad."

Ms. Schairer tells an opposite story: constraints in time and money limit her children to one sports season a year. That compounds Steavon's isolation, she said, and reduces her chances to network on his behalf. When she invited his classmates to a park on his birthday a few months ago, no one came.

"He cried and cried and cried," she said. "I tried the parents I had numbers for, but they didn't respond."

Researchers have found that extracurricular activities can enhance academic performance, and scholars cite a growing activities gap to help explain why affluent children tend to do so much better than others in school.

Four decades ago, families in the top income fifth spent about four times as much as those at the bottom fifth on things like sports, music and private schools, according to research by Greg J. Duncan of the University of California, Irvine, and Richard J. Murnane of Harvard. Now affluent families spend seven times as much.

Two parents also bring two parenting perspectives. Ms. Faulkner does bedtime talks. Mr. Faulkner does math. When Ms. Faulkner's coaxing failed to persuade Jeremy to try hamburgers, Mr. Faulkner offered to jump in a pool fully clothed if he took a bite — an offer Jeremy found too tempting to refuse.

While many studies have found that children of single parents are more likely to grow up poor, less is known about their chances of advancement as adults. But there are suggestions that the absence of a father in the house makes it harder for children to climb the economic ladder.

Scott Winship of the Brookings Institution examined the class trajectories of 2,400 Americans now in their mid-20s. Among those raised in the poorest third as teenagers, 58 percent living with two parents moved up to a higher level as adults, compared with just 44 percent of those with an absent parent.

A parallel story played out at the top: just 15 percent of teenagers living with two parents fell to the bottom third, compared with 27 percent of teenagers without both parents.

"You're more likely to rise out of the bottom if you live with two parents, and you're less likely to fall out of the top," Mr. Winship said.

Mr. Winship interprets his own results cautiously, warning that other differences (like race, education or parenting styles) may also separate the two groups. And even if marriage helped the people who got married, he warns, it might hurt other families if it tied them to troubled men.

"You get back to the question of how many marriageable men there are," he said.

At the same time, scholars have found that marriage itself can have a motivating effect, pushing men to earn more than unmarried peers. Marriage, that is, can help make men marriageable.

As Mr. Faulkner tells it, something like that happened to him — he returned to college after an aimless hiatus because he wanted to marry Ms. Faulkner. "I knew I had to get serious about my life," he said.

His experiences as a father so far suggest just how much there is to be said for simply showing up.

"Thank you for coming, Dad," Justin wrote after a school trip. "I like it when you're with me at every event and watching me do every activity."

He added 16 exclamation points.

End of the Day

Left to do the showing up alone, Ms. Schairer makes big efforts. She rarely misses a weekend of church with the children, and she sacrificed a day's pay this spring to chaperon field day at Steavon and Savannah's school. "They were both saying, 'This is my mom, my mom is here!' " she said.

In February, she received $7,000 of refundable tax credits, the low-wage worker's annual bonus. She prepaid her rent for six months and bought plane tickets to Orlando, Fla. After years of seeing pictures of Ms. Faulkner's vacations, she wanted to give her children one of their own.

"Do you think we'll see Jesus?" Savannah asked on the flight. "I hope the plane doesn't run him over."

They stayed with Ms. Schairer's brother, visited SeaWorld and Gatorland, and brought back happy memories. But the trip soon began to seem long ago, more a break from their life than an embodiment of it.

Ms. Schairer sank into the couch on a recent Friday night, looking weary, and half-watched a rerun of "Friends." Steavon retreated to his room to watch "Superman" alone, and Savannah went out to play with the girl who always seems hungry. Kirsten was in her pajamas at 7 o'clock. They had few weekend plans.

Thirty miles away, Troop 395 was pitching tents beside a rural airstrip, where the next day the boys would take glider rides and earn aviation badges. The fields and barns looked as tidy as cartoons, and an extravagant sunset painted them pomegranate.

The clipboard in Justin Faulkner's hands called for an early reveille. "I'm the patrol leader," he said, beaming.

Thirty minutes later, a rope appeared. Boys started to boast. Mr. Faulkner snapped on his tug of war gloves, only to discover that Justin had disappeared. He found him sitting in the grass nearby, fighting back tears. "I want to go home," Justin said.

Mr. Faulkner did not say much. Jeremy used to get homesick, too. Now he is halfway to Eagle Scout. After a while Mr. Faulkner asked, "Are you sure you don't want to do a tug of war against me?"

Justin watched the other boys tumble. "When?" he said.

"We can do it right now," Mr. Faulkner said.

It was not much of a contest for a man who outweighs his two sons combined by more than 100 pounds. Justin fell face first and bumped through the cool grass — a laughing tenderfoot pulled along by his dad.